
The Skyjacker - His Flights of Fantasy by David G. Hubbard

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BOOK REVIEW

THE SKYJACKER—HIS FLIGHTS OF FANTASY. By DAVID G. HUBBARD. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971. Pp. 262. \$5.95.

The author is a Dallas psychiatrist with special training in psychoanalysis who, in addition to his private psychiatric practice, serves as consultant to the United States Public Health Research Center in Fort Worth, Texas, and to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri. He came quite by accident to the scientific study of skyjackers early in January, 1967 when he was called to examine two skyjackers being held in a federal prison facility. Both men were examined on the same day and that coincidence allowed him to recognize several striking similarities in the psychological patterns of both offenders. The occasion set this trained scientist on the trail of the pathological skyjacker.¹

Dr. Hubbard recalls his difficulties with governmental bureaucracy when he proposed to follow this lead but was able, nevertheless, to conduct taped interviews with twenty skyjackers the results of which are published in this book.² Sixteen of the twenty failed in their attempts and four reached Cuba, but Dr. Hubbard does not distinguish between failures and successes.³ The conclusion which emerges from Dr. Hubbard's study dispels the image of the "average" skyjacker as being a rugged revolutionary type fighting against "capitalistic" oppression, a la "Che" Guevara. The profile which emerges shows these individuals as shy, timid, sexually passive, generally apolitical and almost always consistent failures in almost everything they have ever attempted: marriage, sex, business, and social activity in general. Their appearance is one of helplessness, except for the few exhilarating moments when they seize control of the aircraft. This then became the only diversion from a previous life pattern wherein they had felt dominated and overpowered by circumstances which guided and determined their hapless and helpless lives. Their childhood usually revealed conflict between a violent and often alcoholic father and a very religious and zealous mother, who was usually dominated and abused by

1. The term "skyjacker" is not a legal term referring to a person who engages in the unlawful seizure of aircrafts. It is the author's catchy word of art designed to capture the imagination of the potential reader. A discussion of the Tokyo and Hague Conventions on unlawful seizure of aircrafts is contained in Professor Sundberg's article *supra* at — and Mr. Klimek's comment, *supra* at —.

2. For an excellent book review, see Fletcher Knebel, *Look*, 23-26, February 9, 1971.

3. On figures in hijackings until 1969, see Evans, *Aircraft Hijacking: Its Cause and Cure*, 63 AJIL 695 (1969); for a comprehensive study of cases and disposition, see Hirsch and Fuller, *Aircraft Piracy and Extradition*, 26 N.Y.L. FORUM 392 (1970).

the father. This rather typical Freudian observation is discussed in lay terms and adds nothing to existing scientific knowledge as to the individuals; but the similarities among the interviewed cases is a significant observation.

Dr. Hubbard proposes an interesting theory on the effects of the force of gravity, particularly on the vestibular apparatus of the inner ear, which produces the "sense of balance" necessary to ambient physical reality and the potential damage to this human mechanism (Meniere's disease), resulting in vertigo, loss of hearing, and other symptoms. He suspects that many skyjackers suffered from some mild impairment of the inner ear during childhood which, he surmises, produced severe psychological effects in these individuals. The "crypto-vestibular" data collected by the author during these interviews, reveals that almost all of the interviewed skyjackers had early childhood memories of being in a prone or supine position and unable to rise, or being very frightened and unable to move. This hypothesis fits in the projected image of the skyjacker as Dr. Hubbard sees him. He discloses also that the interviewed subjects had had vivid dreams of flying and were generally obsessed with space; some even had taken flying lessons at one time and most of them had watched the television coverage of space shots with intensive interest. He concluded from this observation that the incidence of skyjacking increased in direct proportion to the intensity of the news coverage of space related activities, observing that skyjackings are almost non-existent during periods when there are no reported space activities. He noted that as soon as astronauts are back on Earth and the news has been absorbed, skyjackings begin to occur. This observation is of limited scientific value, however, since the experiment itself is not of such a nature as to justify generalizations of this variety.

Although interest in space or atmospheric flight is not a determinative factor by itself, it is revealing of something which all other humans share with the skyjackers, namely, the awareness that they are "tied" or "held" to Earth by a force which, although invisible, is an integral part of their lives. The urge to feel free, however, is not demonstrative of any penchant for skyjacking an aircraft. Dr. Hubbard points out that the first thing a newborn infant becomes aware of is the force of gravity. This experience begins in the sac of amniotic fluid inside his mother's body when the unborn child is in a state of suspension or weightlessness, hence, the tendency to seek the feeling thereafter. While only a few individuals can experience actual space flight, anyone with the price of an airline ticket can break away from Earth and fly, for a time at least, experiencing this innate sense of freedom and freedom from the actual sensation of gravitational pull. The skyjackers Dr. Hubbard studied are viewed by him as trying to "break away" or "rise above" their sense of being "held down" by the reality of their lives, while at the same time defying the force of gravity on board the aircraft. Dr. Hubbard goes so far as to state that "[t]he fear of gravitational pull may well serve as the paradigm of all subsequent fears."

Skyjackers are still, according to the author, not usually frightened by the dangers of their conduct, because they are rather pathetic individuals

who are not prone to violence and who are in need of psychiatric help. This is a conclusion which this reviewer fails to note as necessarily logically resulting from the author's premise. Dr. Hubbard is very critical of the attitudes of public officials, judicial officers, airline officials and flight personnel, which he sees as simplistic and vindictive-oriented, seeking only the punishment of the offenders and not their rehabilitation or treatment. With the present state of penology in the United States, *this* position is very defensible.

The solution to the problem of skyjacking, asserts Dr. Hubbard, lies in more research by competent psychiatrists with such persons held in custody throughout the world in order that more can be learned about them. Dr. Hubbard rejects punitive measures such as armed aerial guards and the imposition of the death penalty, which increase the challenge to the skyjacker and actually stimulate the occurrence of skyjackings.

The reader must, however, be cautioned about the members of this control-group study who had no particular political ideology and who, according to Dr. Hubbard, were psychotic.⁴ Since the study does not include politically motivated skyjackers who do not fit the Hubbard mold, these findings can only be of limited value. Dr. Hubbard's study suggests that there is no such thing as a normal political skyjacker, and in fact, even those who claim to be so may have been acting and feeling *as a group* in the same manner as the individual skyjackers he studied. Thus, he transplants psychological findings of individuals to a social-psychological pattern wherein the group as a whole recognized that they were in a desperate and helpless condition and that they were doomed to failure unless they so acted. This hypothesis can only be established after further study, for, as Dr. Hubbard asserts, the solution to the skyjacking problem can only come after we find out exactly who the skyjackers are and what motivates them. That in itself, however, allows a contrary assertion that such motivating force can well be political or humanitarian. The few cases he studied cannot account for the many successful and abortive ones wherein the perpetrator acts out of deep commitment to an ideology or out of determination to strike out against oppressive political conditions. Certainly, any person defiant of authority can be found to act in a manner reflective of his self-conception which can be retraced to his childhood, his inner pressures and social milieu impact. All of these factors do not, however, by themselves take that type of behaviour outside the norm of accepted social behaviour if the group shares the basic values which the actor represented by his manifested conduct.

As the first study of its kind, this book is most illuminating, but its sampling and conclusions have limited relevance. Would anyone question that in a psychopathic ward the patients are psychopaths?

For the lawyer, the book offers no more than insight into some forms of psychosis and a description of psychological factors leading to this type

4. Cf. Bassiouni, *Ideologically Motivated Offenses and the Political Offenses Exception in Extradition—A Proposed Juridical Standard for an Unruly Problem*, 19 DEPAUL L. REV. 217 (1969).

of behaviour. It does not show how to detect nor does it reveal how to cope with this type of psychosis, but merely offers a hypothesis of its *raison d'être* after it has once manifested itself. The criticism leveled against the system of criminal justice is reminiscent of Dr. Karl Meninger's description in his book *The Crime of Punishment*.

The Skyjacker is essentially like any other offender, aware of the legal proscription but unaffected by its intended deterrent effect.⁵ Like other offenders he engages in his antisocial behaviour for a variety of reasons which lead him to that tragic conclusion. That we should know more about what actuates people's antisocial behaviour is axiomatic if we are to evolve an enlightened system of legal prevention and social control of harmful behaviour.

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5. *E.g.*, BASSIOUNI, *CRIMINAL LAW AND ITS PROCESSES: THE LAW OF PUBLIC ORDER* (1969).

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